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ABSTRACT

This Digest looks at recent research, and then asks and considers some important questions about choosing a handwriting program for young children, i.e.: (1) which alphabet is developmentally appropriate; (2) which alphabet is easier to use; (3) which alphabet is easier to read; (4) which alphabet is more easily integrated; (5) which alphabet is easier to teach; and (6) whether slanted manuscript helps with students' transition to cursive handwriting. (NKA)

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Six Questions Educators Should Ask before Choosing a Handwriting Program

Educators involved with young children who are just beginning to write have a very important job. As with all emerging skills, what is learned right from the start will shape lifelong habits and abilities. Writing is a skill used to express thoughts and communicate. A fundamental part of writing is the learning and forming of letters.

With the teaching of any skill there are choices to be made regarding the method(s) of instruction used. When teaching handwriting, is it better to teach using the vertical manuscript letterforms, such as the Zaner-Bloser method of handwriting, or is it better to use a slanted alphabet, such as D'Nealian. What are the differences between the methods and how do those differences affect children who are learning to write?

How educators answer these questions and the course of action they take regarding handwriting instruction may, indeed, affect their students for life. So it would be wise for educators to think carefully, examine all their options, and be certain their choice of handwriting instruction is based upon the most current research (Dobbie & Askov, 1995).

Vertical vs. Slanted: A Historical Perspective

Manuscript writing was brought to the U.S. from England in the early 1920s by Marjorie Wise, a specialist in teaching handwriting. Manuscript caught on as an initial writing style because the letters are formed from simple strokes that are easy for young children to understand and write. The discussion of vertical vs. slanted handwriting instruction commenced in 1968, when the first slanted alphabet was created--the debate has been ongoing ever since.

Seen as a bridge between manuscript and cursive, the slanted alphabet uses unconnected letterforms like the traditional, vertical manuscript, but its letterforms are slanted like cursive. Thus, the slanted alphabet seems easier to write than cursive, yet is similar enough to cursive that children don't have to learn 2 completely different alphabets.

Using this logic, teaching a slanted alphabet to young students seems a good idea. However, after several years of use in some schools, research has found surprising answers to some key questions in the ongoing debate of vertical vs. slanted.

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1. *Which Alphabet Is Developmentally Appropriate?*

Farris (1997) maintains, "By age 3, children produce drawings that are composed of the same basic lines that constitute manuscript letters: (1) vertical lines, (2) horizontal lines, (3) circles... Because of such early experience, most 6-and 7-year-olds can create these vertical and horizontal lines more easily than the relatively complicated connections associated with D'Nealian manuscript or cursive handwriting. Because vertical lines are made with a straight up-and-down motion and horizontal lines by a left-to-right motion, they rely predominantly on already acquired gross motor skills."

On the other hand, modified italic letters use very complicated strokes for young children. When examined closely, slanted letters are actually cursive letters without beginning and, in most cases, ending strokes. Graham (1992) states that "The writing hand has to change direction more often when writing the [slanted] alphabet, do more retracing of lines, and make more strokes that occur later in children's development."

2. *Which Alphabet Is Easier to Write?*

The popularity of the vertical manuscript alphabet is a direct result of its being an easily learned system that relates closely to initial learning. Because there are only 4 simple strokes that make up the vertical manuscript alphabet, writing the letterforms is quickly mastered by young children.

Slanted manuscript, however, was created to be similar to cursive. Because of this, children must learn 12 different strokes. Educational researchers who tested the legibility of slanted manuscript found that children writing vertical manuscript "performed significantly better" than those writing slanted manuscript. The writers of the slanted alphabet "produced more misshapen letters, were more likely to extend their strokes above and below the guidelines, and had greater difficulty maintaining consistency in letter size" (Graham, 1992).

3. *Which Alphabet Is Easier to Read?*

Vertical manuscript letterforms are more easily read than other styles of writing. This is why highway signs and other public signs are most often printed in vertical letter styles. Newspapers, novels, textbooks, computers, and television also make use of vertical manuscript letters because people must be able to read the messages quickly and without confusion. Indeed, advertisers and designers who use type for visual communication favor manuscript and avoid italic because italic is difficult to read. Wherever readability is important, manuscript letters are used.

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Because italic writing is more difficult to read, it interferes with comprehension and speed. In a classic study, Tinker (1955) found that italic print was read 4.2% to 6.3% more slowly in 30 minutes of reading. This is why most literature, especially literature for beginning readers, is published using vertical type.

4. *Which Alphabet Is More Easily Integrated?*

Handwriting is not an isolated part of the language arts. Young children who are learning to write are also learning to read and spell. Letter recognition is the first step, and when the letters children are learning to write are similar to those they use in reading and spelling, success in all 3 skills comes more easily. Kuhl and Dewitz (1994) state that "Since letter recognition is one of the most critical skills for early readers' success, having difficulty with this skill can have a damaging impact on early reading achievement."

Modified italic letterforms are not consistent with the letters used in reading and spelling books; therefore, children must learn to write using one set of symbols and to read and spell using a different set of symbols. Barbe and Johnson (1984) state that the introduction of a style of letters unlike the vertical print found in children's books is likely to confuse the child and may in fact hamper reading ability, especially when the unfamiliar symbols are introduced too early. Kuhl (1994) cites her own classroom experience: "As my kindergarten students began to learn the alphabet and learned to write [using a slanted D'Nealian manuscript adopted by the school], I noticed problems they had [when] learning to recognize letters. They consistently had difficulty identifying several letters, often making the same erroneous response to the same letter. As I recorded all responses in an attempt to analyze what they were doing, I began to notice patterns from child to child. D'Nealian manuscript appeared to be harder to learn."

Upon making this discovery, Kuhl and Dewitz (1994) went on to examine the research to find out why this confusion was happening. They found that letter symbols are learned upon repeated exposure to predictable, distinctive, and constant features. In other words, children experience success when learning to read and spell because the features (shape, angle, etc.) of the letters they are learning do not change significantly from one situation to the next. As children learn to write using the slanted D'Nealian manuscript, they are also reading traditional manuscript letterforms in books and environmental print. The difference in the letterforms between what they are learning to read and what they are learning to write is often substantial, causing great confusion for some children. Children who learn to write using vertical manuscript avoid this confusion. They are learning to read, write, and spell based on the same, constant model.

Hildreth (1963), in a study on early writing as an aid to reading, also pointed out the relationship of manuscript writing to beginning reading and suggested that these areas should not be separated but are in fact mutually reinforced. It is logical to teach children to write letters that are similar to the letters they are learning to read.

5. *Which Alphabet Is Easier to Teach?*

Graham (1992) states: "Before starting school, many children learn how to write traditional [vertical] manuscript letters from their parents or preschool teachers. Learning a special alphabet such as [slanted] means that these children will have to relearn many of the letters they can already write." The vertical manuscript alphabet is easy to teach because there is no reteaching involved. Children are already familiar with vertical letterforms--they have learned them at home.

6. *Does Slanted Manuscript Help with Students' Transition to Cursive?*

Proponents of modified italic letterforms say that initial instruction in their alphabets will facilitate the transition from manuscript to cursive writing, but there is no research available to support this claim. In fact, in an extensive study of the available research, Graham (1992) finds no evidence substantiating claims that using a slanted manuscript alphabet enhances the transition to writing with cursive letters.

Conclusion

After examining the available research and answering the most common questions in the ongoing debate of vertical vs. slanted handwriting instruction, educators are left with one final question: Which alphabet will I teach my students? There are 2 choices: the vertical alphabet which, according to research, is more developmentally appropriate, easier to read, and easier to write for young children as well as being easier for educators to integrate and teach; or, the slanted alphabet, which was originally designed with the good intention of moving children more quickly and easily into cursive, but has been shown by research and experience to not only have fallen short of its original goal, but also to have created some problems for young children. The alphabet teachers choose should aid the teaching and learning process, not cause unnecessary difficulty, now or later. After all, in the final analysis there is one true measurement of whether a skill has been mastered or not--student success.

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